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POPULATION TRENDS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Election Demographics

by David B. Hill and
Mary M. Kent

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Election Demographics

Summary

The American form of government relies on the participation of its citizens. But only a slight majority of citizens over age 18 vote in most elections; only 46 percent turned out for the 1986 elections. The demography of the voting-age population is a crucial ingredient in elections because characteristics such as age, race, and education are strongly related to the likelihood of voting and, to a lesser extent, to political preferences. The success of a political campaign often hinges on how much candidates and their staffs know about the population in their district.

Recent demographic trends have also affected elective politics. For example, the movement of population into the Sunbelt helped weaken the Democratic party in some southern states, while the changes in the ethnic mix have shifted the balance of power in major urban areas.

Generally, an individual is more likely to register and vote as he or she grows older, up to about age 75. Only 22 percent of those 18 to 24 years old voted in the 1986 elections, compared to 65 percent of those age 65 to 74. The likelihood of voting increases with education. College graduates, only 18 percent of the voting-age population, cast 24 percent of all votes in 1986. Voting also increases with income and with length of residence.

Historically, greater percentages of men than women, and of whites than blacks, voted. But these gaps have diminished over the past two decades. Hispanic citizens are slightly less likely to vote than either blacks or whites.

Non-demographic factors like religion and lifestyle are also important predictors of political behavior. The distinctive political "culture" of population groups is affected by national events and political figures prominent during the formative young adult years, giving some generations, like the Roosevelt "New Dealers" and the "60s Democrats," a special identity.

Faced with escalating campaign costs and the disintegration of traditional party alliances, candidates have to learn more about the potential voters within their districts. Public opinion surveys are the most common campaign research activity, but polls rating a candidate's popularity cannot predict election outcomes unless they reflect the opinions of the population most likely to vote.

The availability of U.S. Census data on computer and the vastly improved data-storage capacity of microcomputers have raised expectations that demographic data can be used more widely to help consultants pinpoint areas with the most likely voters or which are the best bets for fund raising, maximizing scarce campaign funds. Survey results and past election returns can be combined with demographic estimates for counties, for example, to rank areas according to the estimated number of voters and the expected election outcomes.

Initial attempts to use more sophisticated demographic research for campaign strategy have had mixed results. One technique, the Claritas Cluster system, has been highly successful in commercial advertising, but has proved less cost-effective for most political campaigns. However, the basic premise of the Cluster system—that people with similar demographic characteristics hold similar views and vote alike—underlies several other systems used by political consultants.

A more promising use of demographic data by politicians involves the creation of "enhanced" data bases which combine demographic estimates and past election returns for small geographic areas with information on individuals' magazine subscriptions, past political contributions, and the like, from direct mail data bases.

Recent Supreme Court decisions, greater availability of data, and new computer technologies will have an impact on the redrawing of congressional, state, and local election districts required after the 1990 census. This process will probably involve more intensive use of computer-generated maps and demographic analysis, and more litigation, than ever before.

Several demographic trends promise to affect the future political scene. Among these are the general aging of the population, which gives a numerical advantage to senior citizens, and the increasing political participation of women and blacks. Because of their rapidly increasing numbers and geographic concentration, Hispanic Americans have a potential to wield more political power in the future.

Election Demographics

by David B. Hill and Mary M. Kent

The success of a political campaign often hinges on a detailed knowledge of the voting public—who they are, where they live, work, and the way they think. The demography of the voting-age population within a political district is a crucial ingredient in winning an election because demographic characteristics such as age, sex, race, and education are strongly related to the likelihood of voting and, to some extent, to political preference. Changing demographic trends in the United States have affected the American political process in many ways, from revisions of congressional districts to shifts away from the traditional party allegiance of Southerners and labor union members.

In decades past, candidates were often chosen by the party leadership, and elected to office by an electorate faithful to one party. But political parties are less able to count on their traditional supporters because of social, demographic, and economic changes. Also, the modern techniques of "packaging" a candidate for a wide television audience disregard party lines. Homogeneous neighborhoods, known and courted by party precinct bosses, have been broken up by the deterioration and "renaissance" of many urban areas. Economic expansion and population growth have transformed farmland into residential neighborhoods, or replaced houses with high-rise apartments, altering the demographic make-up of political districts. Both international and inter-state migration have served to reconfigure political alliances in high-growth states like California, Texas, and Florida.

The American election process has been plagued with escalating campaign costs. A campaign for the U.S. Senate or a state governorship routinely costs several million dollars. Candidates vying for a contested seat in the U.S. House of Representatives or a state legislature typically spend $100,000 to $1,000,000 campaign dollars. These high financial stakes encourage political campaign consultants to look for ever more cost-effective ways to reach their public. In the 1980s, this desire to define and target the American electorate has been fueled by the availability of computer files with an unprecedented volume of information, and by new computer technologies which ease the management of large data bases. Political consultants are experimenting with ways to incorporate demographic data and polling data, past election results, and commercial mailing lists to help run campaigns and analyze election results. Demographic research may assume greater importance within the political arena, as it has in consumer marketing.

In the 1986 elections, only 22 percent of adults under age 24 voted.

Modern campaigns are also faced with the fact that the percentage of American adults who vote in major elections has been declining since the 1960s, the decade when voter turnout was at an all-time high. Presidential elections attract the highest voter turnout, yet only 56 percent of the voting-age public cast ballots in the 1984 Reagan/Mondale contest, while 63 percent voted in the 1960 Kennedy/Nixon presidential race. In off-year elections, the percentages fall well below 50 percent.[1] In the 1986 congressional elections, only 46 percent of those over age 18 reported voting.

Regardless of the popularity of a candidate,

elections are won or lost depending upon who bothers to get to the polls on Election Day. The large percentage of non-voters may be viewed as a great reservoir of votes which could swing an election either way. Negative campaign messages, which become more acerbic each election year, are primarily aimed at reducing voter turnout among a candidate's supporters rather than causing them to switch their support to the opposition.

Demography in Campaigns

In most modern campaigns, the majority of funds are reserved for advertising; only 5 to 11 percent of total outlays are allocated to research, principally for public opinion polling by telephone. Demographic research has played a relatively minor role in the development of political campaign strategy, typically limited to the design and analysis of opinion surveys. Basic demographic data are also used to plan media advertisements, direct mail campaigns, fund raising, and "get-out-the-vote" efforts.

Beginning in the 1980s, demographic data have been used more directly by some consultants to pinpoint specific geographic areas which are, for example, the best bets for fund raising, or most likely to be persuaded to support a candidate; as well as areas not worth any special promotion. These techniques allow the most cost-effective use of scarce campaign funds because consultants can invest the most advertising dollars in areas which promise the best return in terms of votes or contributions.

Opinion surveys on political candidates and issues are still the most visible type of campaign research. Each major political party has its favorite pollsters; the past few presidents have even had their "own." The parties rely on them to learn what the public is thinking, to help them plan campaign platforms, and select candidates.

Political consultants use polling data to identify issues they should emphasize to promote their candidate. Polls also measure a candidate's popularity and may indicate which groups are most likely to be persuaded to support him or her and which groups are ardent supporters of the opponent. Campaigners must try to promote interest in an election for the right kind of person—the one likely to vote for their candidate or referendum item—yet not alarm the opposition, increasing an opponent's voter turnout.

Who Votes?

Studies of voting behavior have shown that certain groups of people are more likely to vote than others. Specifically, the likelihood of voting increases with age, education, and income; and it is greater among non-Hispanic whites than blacks or Hispanic Americans. Other characteristics like occupation, home ownership, and marital status are also associated with the propensity to vote; however, most of these are closely related to age, education, income, and ethnic group as well.

Since Americans vote by secret ballot, the characteristics of voters may be determined only through surveys. The U.S. Census Bureau has conducted surveys on voting and registration after each national election since 1964. However, the number of people who report that they voted in an election usually exceeds the actual number of ballots counted by 9 to 12 percent, suggesting that people feel compelled to say they fulfilled this civic duty even if they did not. The 1986 post-election survey reported the largest discrepancy to date; 80 million people told Census Bureau interviewers they had voted, 23 percent more than the number of recorded votes.

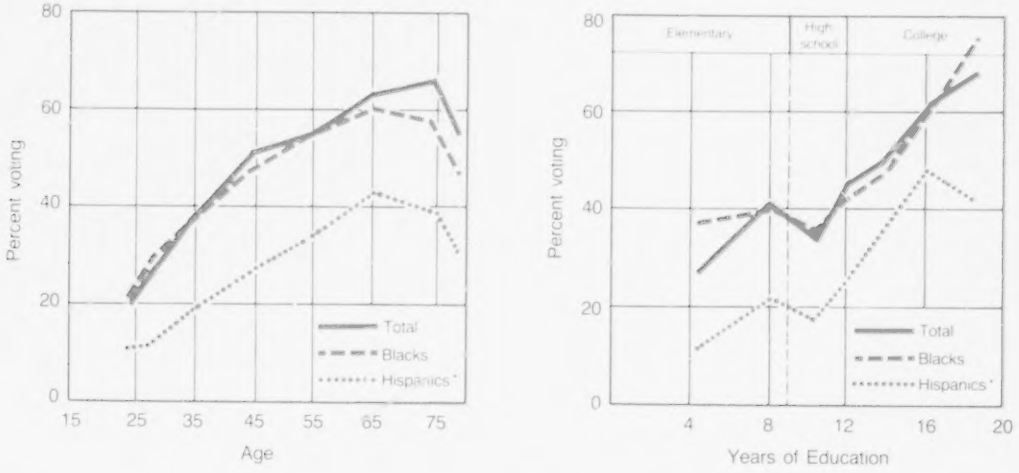
The likelihood of voting increases sharply with age up to about age 75. In the 1986 elections, only 22 percent of those 18 to 24 years old voted, compared to 49 percent of those 35 to 44, and 65 percent of those 65 to 74 years old, as shown in Figure 1, page 4. Those between ages 65 and 74 are most likely to vote; in fact they have increased their participation in every election since 1976, while voting in younger age groups has waned.[2]

The decline in the turnout of voting-age Americans is in part explained by the fact that the average age of the electorate is younger now than in the 1960s. In 1966, less than half of the voting-age population was under 45, but in 1986, 58 percent was under 45. Between 1966 and 1986, the minimum voting age had been lowered to 18 and most of the large baby boom generation—Americans born between 1947 and 1964—had passed into adulthood, swelling the proportion of young people in the potential electorate. However, political events and economic recession during these years are also believed to have affected the turnout of voters. Public confidence in government was at record low levels in the 1970s.[3]

Educational attainment is even more strongly related to the likelihood of voting than is age. A young college graduate, for example, is more likely to vote than a middle-aged high school graduate. Also, for college graduates, the likelihood of voting

Figure 1

Voter turnout by age and education, 1986 congressional elections



*Hispanics may be of any race; about one-third were ineligible to vote due to foreign citizenship.

Source: ref. 1.

increases only modestly with age, while voting increases sharply among the least educated citizens as they grow older.[4]

Education increases a person's ability to follow politics and gather the information necessary for making political choices. Dealing with the bureaucratic aspects of attending school—filling out forms, meeting deadlines, and waiting in lines—helps people overcome the hurdles required for registration and voting. In order to vote, a citizen must learn where, when, and how to register, within a specific deadline. On Election Day, he has to find the polling place—usually different from the place of registration—during the hours it is open. Then he or she must figure out how to operate a device only encountered in the polling booth.

Voter turnout increases sharply with income, a variable highly correlated with education. Americans in the highest income groups and with the most education make up a disproportionate share of the voters; their influence at the ballot box exceeds their numbers. In 1986, 39 percent of all reported voters had family incomes in excess of $35,000, while this group accounted for only 33 percent of the voting-age population. College graduates, 18 percent of the voting-age population in 1986, cast 24 percent of all votes.[5]

Until the 1970s, men outvoted women by a large margin. This gender gap has slowly been closing, and in the 1976 presidential elections, equal percentages of men and women voted. In 1984, women actually outvoted men by a small margin; in the 1986 congressional elections, about 46 percent of each sex reportedly cast their ballots (see Figure 2).

The increasing participation of women in the electoral process is partly a product of the increase in the educational levels of women and the entrance of more women into the labor force, particularly into white collar jobs associated with higher voter turnout.

However, women of retirement age have increased their voting participation even more than working women over the past two decades. In the 1972 presidential election, 49 percent of the women 75 or older voted; in the 1984 election, 57 percent of this age group voted. This phenomenon is partially explained by the gradual decline in the number of women who grew up before 1920, when the 19th Amendment guaranteed women the right to vote. This generation is being replaced by women with a more politically active heritage.[6]

Historically, black Americans have been much less likely to vote than whites. Voting registration

requirements like poll taxes and literacy tests in some Southern states created insurmountable hurdles for many blacks. As late as 1962, only 5 percent of the voting-age black population in Mississippi and 13 percent of the voting-age blacks in Alabama were registered to vote. But the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and subsequent legal decisions have increased the political participation of blacks.[7] The gap in the voter turnout of blacks and whites has diminished over the past decade. Since 1972 some 40 to 50 percent of black Americans have voted in national elections, just a few percentage points below these percentages for whites.

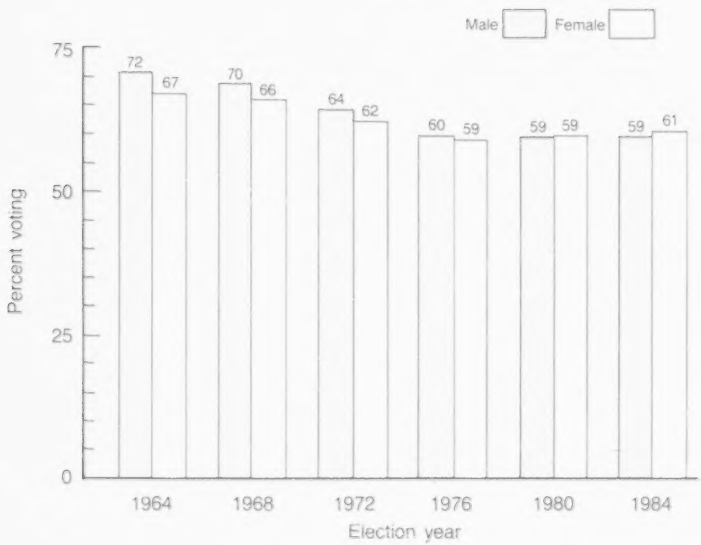
Blacks form between one-fifth and one-third of the electorate in seven states, all in the South. They are a majority of the voting population in 15 U.S. congressional districts, 11 of which were represented by a black congressman in 1984. Also, blacks are concentrated in specific urban areas throughout the country, making their votes crucial in many congressional, city, and state races.

Although they account for only about 10 percent of the voting-age population nationally, blacks present a special problem for Republicans in presidential elections because they tend to vote as a block for the Democratic candidate. Republicans generally must capture 65 percent of the white vote in order to elect a GOP presidential candidate.

Hispanic Americans have a record of low voter turnout. Only 24 percent reported voting in the 1986 election, and only 36 percent were even registered to vote. Many Hispanics face serious barriers to participation in the electoral process. About a third of all resident Hispanics are not citizens and may not vote. Also, they tend to have other characteristics related to low voter turnout. They have less formal education, limited English, and low incomes. About one-fourth of Hispanic families are below the poverty level. The Hispanic population is young with an average age of only 26, compared to 32 for all Americans.

Nevertheless, 41 percent of Hispanic *citizens* reported voting in 1986, only 5 percentage points lower than the turnout for whites. Once registered,

Figure 2
Voter turnout by sex, presidential elections: 1964-1984



Source: ref. 2

Hispanics are as likely to vote as other groups.[8] In 1986, 80 percent of the Hispanics who were registered to vote cast ballots, actually higher than the percentage of registered whites or blacks who voted (see Figure 3).

Other important demographic factors in the likelihood of voting include geographic mobility, home ownership, and living arrangements. Generally, people are classified as a "most likely voter" by polling firms only after they have resided at their current address for at least four years. Some analysts suggest that it takes a presidential election to push residents to actually register and vote the first time in a new community. Also, long-term residents are more likely to own rather than rent their homes. In the 1986 elections, 59 percent of homeowners reported voting, compared with only 28 percent of renters. Among senior citizens, voting appears to drop for those who live alone while it continues to increase among those living with other people. Married people of all ages participate in more elections than single adults.

Finding Likely Voters

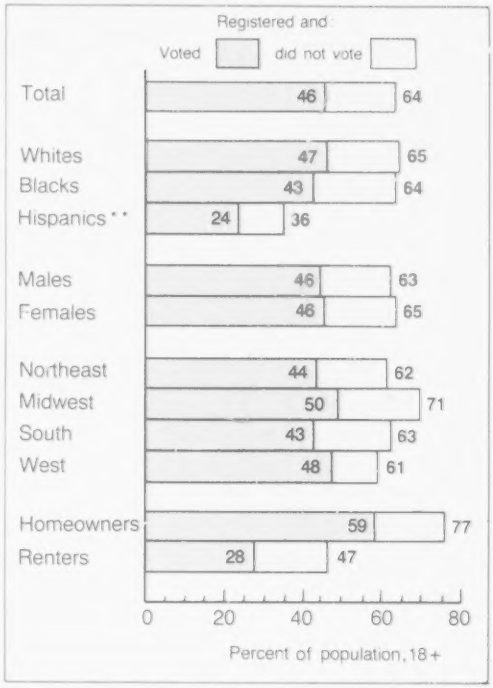
Campaign pollsters rely on demographic data to estimate the population most likely to participate in elections. The typical pre-election survey is drawn from a sample of *all* persons registered to vote. But only about two-thirds of those registered will vote in a statewide election. Most polling firms have developed their own technique to winnow down the sample to those most likely to vote, incorporating demographic data with the attitudinal data collected from each individual.

These techniques must allow for the fact that any individual is likely to have characteristics related to both a "high" and "low" propensity to vote, for example, high educational attainment combined with young age and low income. The Houston-based consulting firm, Tarrance and Associates, relies on a method which ranks the "propensity to vote" using a four point system based primarily on age, education, length of residence, and type of housing, combined with political preference responses from surveys.[9]

Many political analysts believe the level of voter turnout in an election can determine the outcome. A light turnout, in which only the "most likely" voters participate, typically favors Republicans because they tend to be a high-income, college-educated group, while a heavy turnout, including voters from all income and educational levels, usually favors Democrats.

Figure 3

Percent of adults registered to vote, by selected characteristics, 1986*



*U.S. population age 18 and older.
**Hispanics may be of any race; about one-third were ineligible to vote due to foreign citizenship.

Source: ref. 3

Forecasting Election Results

There is a long history of the use of polls to predict election results. One famous instance of an erroneous election forecast occurred during the 1936 presidential contest between Alf Landon and Franklin Roosevelt. A respected magazine, the *Literary Digest* predicted President Roosevelt's defeat, based on its own survey. The *Digest* drew its sample from telephone directories and automobile registration lists at a time when both telephone service and car ownership were mainly privileges of the middle and upper classes. This skewed the survey sample toward the more wealthy voters,

Voting has increased among older Americans while it has declined in the younger age groups.

who supported Landon, while Roosevelt was enormously popular among the less affluent. On Election Day, a tidal wave of voters supported Roosevelt, handing him 46 states and two-thirds of the popular vote.

The *Literary Digest*, which had successfully called elections for twenty years, ceased its polling activities in the wake of the 1936 election and folded altogether shortly thereafter. But the incident had positive consequences for the development of surveys because it forced pollsters to acknowledge the importance of demographic stratification of survey samples.

Pollsters are sometimes criticized for misrepresenting their results according to what they think their clients want, or trying to sway public opinion to bring in more campaign funds. "When the polls go good for me," former President Nixon is quoted as saying in a 1968 race, "the cash register really rings."[10] But pollsters must maintain a reputation for integrity as well as accuracy if they want credibility with the public, the media, and their clients.

Insuring the accuracy of these polls is problematic because surveys capture public opinion at only one moment in time. The public's attitudes are subject to change over time, particularly in response to a specific event like an embarrassing disclosure about a candidate.

Political pollsters can attempt to measure whether their survey sample truly represented the population they were trying to poll. One widely used method of "external validation" is to compare the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents with the most recent estimates based on census data. But finding good estimates can be difficult.

Because pollsters are trying to catch likely voters, the registered voter population, rather than the general adult population, is the most appropriate standard for comparison. Estimates of the characteristics of registered voters are not often available for small areas. For states with low rates of voter registration, such as in the South, inferring election results from a telephone survey of the general public is particularly risky.

Pollsters often use the Census Bureau post-election survey data to estimate the registered voter population. The Census Bureau publishes state-level voter registration figures by sex and race or ethnic group, but not by more detailed characteristics like age, occupation, or education.

New techniques like computer-assisted random digit dialing have improved the quality of telephone survey samples because they can catch households with unlisted or new numbers. However, these surveys have a built-in bias against households without telephones and underrepresent other voters—a problem similar to that experienced by the *Literary Digest*. Telephone access is still not universal in the United States; in 1980, 30 percent of the black households in Mississippi did not have telephones. Because most households without telephones contain low-income or highly mobile individuals—characteristics associated with low voter turnout—some pollsters feel that missing them in a survey will not seriously bias the result.

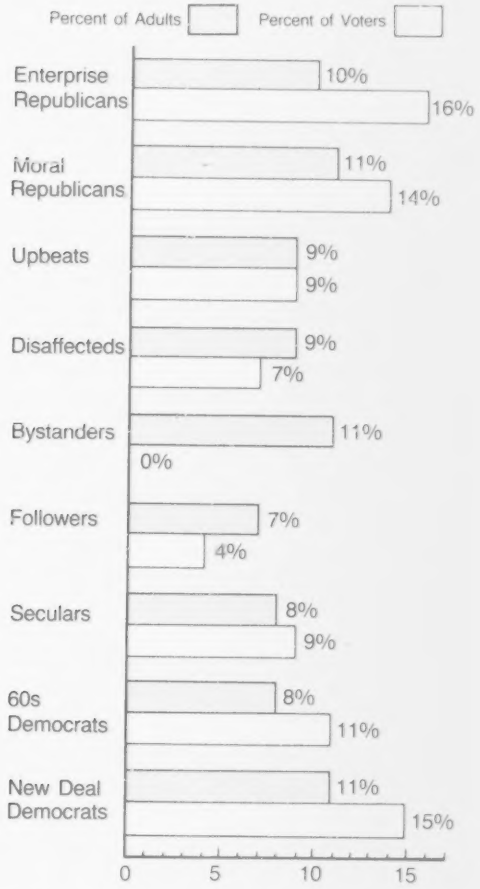
Because of tight schedules and budgets, political surveys must often be conducted within one or two evenings, without allowing repeated call-backs to "no answers" on successive days. This "no-call-back" methodology can cause subtle distortions of a survey sample. Women and senior citizens, for example, are often overrepresented in surveys simply because they are more likely to be at home while young adults may be underrepresented because they spend less time at home.

The time and day of the week of interviews are also important. For example, pollsters have learned that in Texas, interviews conducted on a Friday evening during the fall football season miss a significant proportion of adults with school-age children. Most surveys are conducted on weekday evenings between five and nine o'clock, when the largest proportion of people are at home.

Black Americans are treated as a special case by some political pollsters because blacks tend to vote as a block, supporting Democratic candidates almost 95 percent of the time. In recent

Figure 4

"Typology Groups" within the New American Electorate, Gallup poll, 1987



Source: ref. 4

political races in the South, some polling firms have adopted a strategy that hinges on an estimation of the black population within their candidate's district. They interview white voters to estimate the percentage of the white population supporting each candidate. They then add 95 percent of the estimated number of black voters to their tally of whites supporting the Democratic candidate to produce a total for the district.

This technique saves considerable time and money and allows a more extensive polling of white respondents. But because of its assumption that black support for Democratic candidates is intractable, the technique is somewhat controversial. While most blacks identify themselves as Democrats, some will support Republican candidates. An estimated 20 percent of the black vote in Virginia was cast for Republican John Warner in his 1978 election to the U.S. Senate. Edward Brooke, one of the few blacks ever elected to the U.S. Senate, was a Republican.

Voter Profiles

Simple demographic facts cannot predict how individuals will vote because their beliefs are affected by cultural traditions, such as opposition to government interference, and by life experiences, like participation in the armed forces and education. The kind of job a person has is also associated with voting behavior, even accounting for educational differences.

Public opinion pollsters have developed various methods to categorize Americans according to beliefs and voting behavior, linking them to socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. A 1987 survey of the American electorate, conducted by the Gallup Organization, categorized the voting-age population into 11 distinct groups, shown in Figure 4. Each group was defined not only by socioeconomic characteristics and voting preferences, but also by its lifestyle and general world view—variables which might affect political leanings as well as likelihood to vote.

The Gallup study identified nine basic values that "both drive-and-divide Americans", including: belief in God; attitudes toward government and business; tolerance of different lifestyles and beliefs; and obligations to provide for the needy. But more individual matters such as financial pressures or feelings of alienation were also measured.

The groups join together in unusual coalitions that defy party lines, according to the analysis. Enterprisers and Moralists tend to be solidly Republican, yet clash on issues relating to tolerance and social justice like abortion or civil rights. Moralists, New Deal Democrats, and the Disaffected (who do not vote) share similar opinions on national defense and foreign policy matters.

The study defined two major "generation gaps" emanating from two separate issues: first, those born before World War II, over 45 years of age in 1987, are more likely to be strongly anti-communist than other Americans. Second, those born

after 1957, under age 30 in 1987, are more optimistic about America than older individuals.

Four of the 11 voting blocks could be identified with a specific generation. Upbeats are predominately under age 30; Seculars and '60s Democrats tend to be between 30 and 44; and New Dealers are primarily over age 50. Presidents Reagan, Kennedy, and Franklin Roosevelt, respectively, and major events during their administrations, influenced the members of these groups during their political "coming of age", and still affect their attitudes toward the government.[11]

It is noteworthy that the baby boom generation, the 75 million Americans born between 1947 and 1964, were not found to be homogeneous regarding political beliefs or lifestyles. The baby boomers, now 45 percent of all voting-age Americans, do not represent a voting block.

Other recent surveys of the new American electorate, by Opinion Market Research, Inc., found that religion, income, and occupational ties to the government have a stronger association with political preferences now than a decade ago. Higher income levels, long associated with Republican support, have overcome the traditional allegiance to the Democratic party by Catholics, Jews, white southerners, and union members, these studies found. Among whites who are regular churchgoers, Republican support is strong even in the lower income groups.[12]

However the electorate is defined, partisan divisions are complex—probably more so than in past decades—increasing the uncertainties and risk associated with conducting political campaigns.

Changes in the American electorate heighten the need to fine-tune political campaigns.

"Geodemographics"

While public opinion polling produces a wealth of information about the electorate, political consultants need to know which types of people live where, for the only people who really count are those in a given district who actually vote. Even presidential elections are won, not by gaining the greatest total number of votes, but by winning a plurality of state electoral votes. In local elections, knowing the make-up of voters in small geographical areas is vital for a successful campaign.

Since budget limitations usually prohibit surveys of small areas, professionals have developed various techniques to piece together available information about a district to gauge the political behavior of its population. Past voting records are perhaps the most important information source. However, if an area has undergone a lot of population growth, or if the boundaries of a congressional district have changed, past records may be misleading. A demographic profile of a district based on the U.S. Census is another important data source. The decennial population census collects information from every household, aggregated into census tracts with an average of 4,000 persons. Socioeconomic variables such as education or occupation are collected on 20 percent of the census forms. The census and projections based on the last census, are the major source of population data for small areas.

John Morgan, a political consultant to the major Republican campaign committees, uses demographic and electoral data to target specific states or districts within states for maximum campaign efforts—predicting where a party's votes are likely to come from and suggesting policy and issue alternatives that might be emphasized.

For a statewide race, Morgan prepares detailed county maps showing, among other characteristics: population size; population growth (or decline); national ancestry; race or ethnic group; religion; educational attainment; home values; and

A Case Study: Demographics and Campaigns

Alaska is entitled to one Representative in the U.S. Congress, elected at large. The seat has been held since 1973 by Don Young, Republican of Fort Yukon, a teacher in winter and river boat captain in summer before embarking on a long career in local and state politics. Young was elected to the Alaska state legislature in 1966 and served there until his election to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Congressman Young has relied on Edmonds Associates, media consultants based in Alexandria, Virginia, to assist in each reelection bid since 1980, but he disagreed with Edmonds' approach to his 1984 campaign. At first.

Edmonds' discussions with politicians and political "pros" in Alaska highlighted the importance of migration for the state. As of 1980, two-thirds of the residents had moved there from another state or country. Young himself was born in Meridian, California. The general consensus was that a lot of Texans and other oil people were coming because of the North Slope oil fields.

For the 1984 campaign, Edmonds Associates ordered a demographic run-down from a subsidiary of the Population Reference Bureau, now established as Decision Demographics. Tom Edmonds says, "We knew it was a 'transient' state, with a high population turnover. We needed to know the numbers. And what the numbers don't say. Who did we lose? Who did we gain? Who are the new people?"

The demographic analysis described an influx of young, well-educated professionals from the West Coast into Alaska. Less than 6 percent of recent migrants had come from Texas; about a half had settled in Anchorage, Alaska's largest city.

The analysis documented a larger-than-expected turnover in population. Partly because of the completion of the oil pipeline and closing of military bases, over 100,000 people left Alaska between 1975 and 1980, slightly more than the number moving into the state during that period.

"What we learned from the demographers," says Tom Edmonds, "was that though Don Young had been *the* Representative from Alaska since 1973, while he had been around for quite a while, the 1984 voters hadn't. They didn't know who he was, or what he had done. They had to be educated." Edmonds recommended airing a 2-minute political biography, rather than the customary 30-second commercial, documenting all that Don Young had accomplished for Alaska. Congressman Young thought that was ridiculous: he had been in politics for over 20 years, everyone knew who he was and what he had done for the state. So Edmonds had to educate *him*, using figures from the demographic analysis.

The next major task was finding an issue. "You need an emotional issue without a downside; a win-win situation," advises Tom Edmonds. "It was also fairly easy to find an 'enemy' because of the Alaskan situation and character. Alaskans are anti-authority; even though so many of them work for the government; they resent the 'lower 48' making decisions concerning them. So the enemy was the blankety-blanks in the lower 48 who know nothing whatsoever about the special conditions of life in Alaska. And the hero is Don Young, who made the state into what drew the newcomers."

Their media spots stressed Young's role in making the Trans-Alaska Pipeline possible, overcoming "ecofreak" objections to its construction and enriching the state. Young was also praised for supporting the 200-mile territorial limit on foreign fishing and controlling development on the 49 percent of Alaska that is "protected" land.

The result? Young received over 113,000 votes to his two opponents' 86,000 votes. "Only four times in Alaskan history has the vote total ever gone over 100,000. And three of those four times we've done it for Young," reports Tom Edmonds.

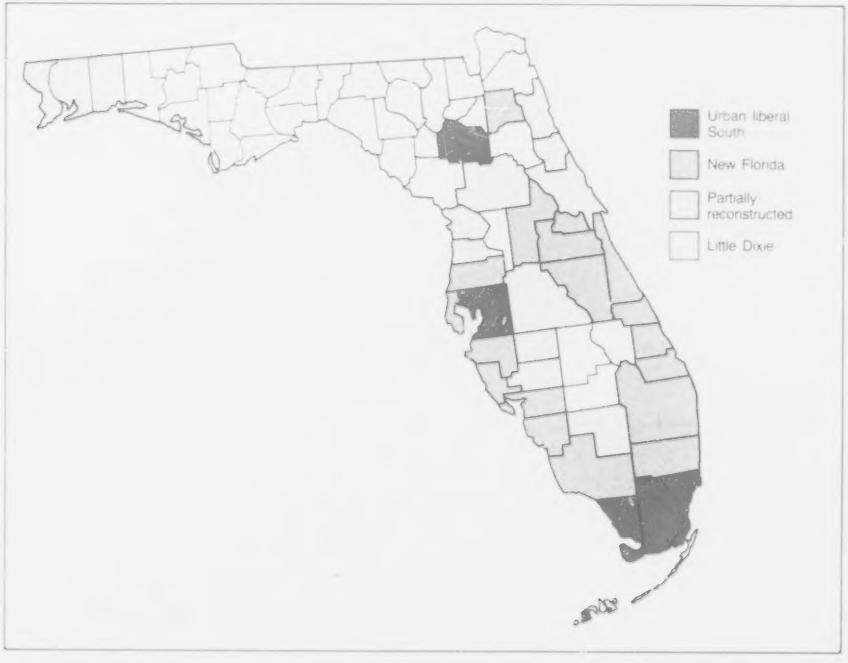
"The demographic data helped us discover who our target audience was, and what issue, what strategy would appeal to them. It told us where they were, and enough about them to help us determine who they were and what their interests were. And we won the election."

A large turnover in Alaska's population during the 1970s and 1980s meant many new voters had to be educated about their incumbent Congressman.

female marital status. Morgan combines these demographic indicators with election returns from the past several decades, to create a picture of the social and political culture of each county. He then weaves these counties into regions which are evaluated in terms of the "recruitability" of voters by the client, in his case, the Republican party. The regions become the basic elements for campaign strategy, sometimes even for candidate recruitment.

For the 1986 elections, Morgan developed such a map of Florida counties for the firm Tarrance and Associates, shown in Figure 5. The counties were aggregated into regions which represented the

Figure 5
"Political regions" of Florida, 1986



Source: ref. 5

old, traditional Southern Florida, or the new urbanized Florida of immigrants from Midwestern or Eastern states. Old Floridians resist new taxes or tax innovations much more strongly than the new Floridians, many of whom were accustomed to higher taxes in their home states. In states with rapid population growth, such as Florida, Texas, or California, this type of analysis can be invaluable, particularly where growth management issues are central to the campaign.

The Cluster System

In the 1970s, a revolutionary system for demographic targeting was developed by Jonathan Robbin, of Claritas, Inc., using data from the national decennial census. The Claritas Cluster system ushered in a new era in political campaigning and was widely used by the Democratic party in the early 1980s. Robbin devised a statistical method to group 535 census variables into 34 composite variables representing social class, home ownership, ethnicity and race, family life cycle, and mobility. Claritas then assigned each of the 250,000 census enumeration units to one of 40 homogeneous groups, called Clusters, on the basis of these variables.[13] Each Cluster consisted of many neighborhoods throughout the U.S. which were linked, not by geography, but by their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The Clusters were given colorful, descriptive monikers such as Dixie-tenements, Bunkers' Neighbors, Blue-blood Estates, or Bohemian Mix. Residents of a Bunkers' Neighbors Cluster in New York were assumed to have similar lifestyles, opinions, and, most important, to vote like residents of a Bunkers' Neighbors Cluster in Detroit.[14]

The Cluster system was originally developed for the consumer marketing and advertising industries. Its first major political application was in a right-to-work initiative battle in Missouri in 1978. Democratic consultant Matt Reese, teamed with pollster William Hamilton, used the system to identify Clusters most likely to be persuaded to vote against the initiative. Selected Clusters were surveyed to determine the most effective direct mail approach, and a flurry of campaign literature, tailored to each specific Cluster, was distributed. The initiative was defeated despite early polls showing that the public favored the measure by a 6-to-4 margin.

Other analyses of the same Missouri election showed that the initiative would have lost anyway, and that the Claritas Cluster system is too imprecise for political applications. The sample sizes within Clusters were too small, critics claimed, and the criteria used to define the Clusters could not predict political behavior. Nevertheless, the basic concepts of cluster analysis have survived in a variety of proprietary targeting and media-buying systems within the political consulting community.

Demographic analyses can help consultants target media messages to specific population groups.

One commonly used technique, "polling simulation", is related to the Cluster system in concept but not methodology. It is based on the assumption that persons with similar demographic characteristics share similar views. For example, if national-level surveys showed that all persons of Italian ancestry and most Catholics oppose abortion, then campaign messages on this issue would be directed toward or *away* from locales where Italian Catholics are concentrated.

Political Data Bases

Use of geodemographics resembled a fad during the early 1980s' campaigns, and were sometimes used inappropriately. But with the experience of these elections behind them, political consultants are experimenting with new methodologies. The most promising are probably "enhanced data bases" which combine demographic data with other types of information on individuals and geographic areas. These data bases have applications in all aspects of the political election process: selection of candidates, fund raising, targeting of direct mail, and get-out-the-vote efforts.[15]

Aided by new computer technology, demographic data based on the census, poll results, church membership counts, and other data files

available for small geographic areas may be merged with registered voter rolls (which may be purchased from some state or local governments), magazine subscription lists, records of previous political donations, and the many other types of lists on which citizens' names and addresses appear. The obvious advantage of an enhanced data base over the cluster techniques is that direct mail or get-out-the-vote efforts need not be wasted on individuals within a geographic area who are either not worth the effort, for example, they have never registered to vote, or who will probably vote for their party regardless of any direct appeal they receive. One Republican party leader used such a data base to mail absentee ballots to individuals who were registered Republicans but were in the younger age brackets and therefore less likely to go to the polls.

The use of enhanced data bases for more efficient fund-raising drives has created some excitement in the political community. According to one political consultant, "it's been an accepted fact of life that your first fund-raising mailing . . . will lose money. But I've seen instances where computer targeting has helped to *show a profit* on the first mailing, in one case even quintupling the initial investment."[16]

Many problems still plague the creation of enhanced data bases. The principal stumbling blocks are the lack of necessary data files for a given district and an inability to merge some data files when, for example, zip-code areas do not correspond to the boundaries of a congressional district. However, the potential benefits are so great that the major political parties continue to invest in them. The Republican National Committee, the acknowledged leader in data base development, reportedly has computer files with election results by precinct for the entire country.

Demographic Trends and Future Elections

The Baby Boomers. Americans born in the post World War II baby boom now constitute 45 percent of the voting-age population. Throughout their lives, this group of 75 million has had major impacts on society, straining the educational system, the job market, and, more recently, the housing market. However, they have not yet had a great impact on the electoral system because they are less likely to vote than previous generations and, as suggested by the 1987 Gallup survey, they don't vote alike.

Coming of age politically during the uproar of the civil rights movement, the controversial Vietnam war, and the Watergate scandal, the baby boom generation born before 1957 are thought by some political scientists to be especially cynical and withdrawn from the political process. However, even the baby boomers are more likely to vote as they age. In 1986, only 36 percent of those born in the midst of the baby boom, 1954 to 1958, voted, but this was a 2 percentage point increase over their 1982 turnout, and a 10 point increase over their 1978 turnout. As the bulk of this group passes age 35, around 1992, there will probably be an increase in overall voter turnout simply because a greater proportion of the voting-age population will be in the older age groups.

Senior Citizens. In 1987, 12 percent of the U.S. population was over age 65; by the year 2020, 17 percent will be in that age group. Because 50 to 70 percent of those over 65 vote in elections, senior citizens already constitute a powerful voting block, and their political clout will grow as they increase in number. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has begun an active campaign to encourage its 27 million members to keep politically informed and to become active on issues, like Social Security, that most directly affect them.[17] They may become one of the best organized forces in American politics.

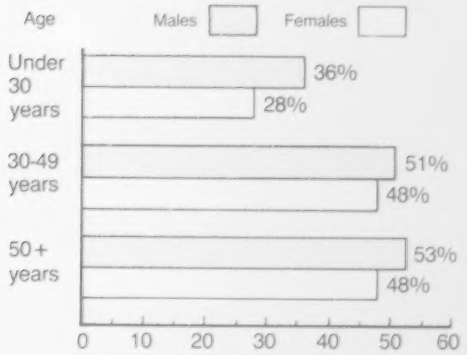
Black Voters. One of the major objectives of Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential bid was to increase voter registration among blacks. The registration drives carried out throughout the country have been credited with boosting both registration and voter turnout for blacks. In 1986, 25 percent of blacks age 18 to 24 voted, exceeding that percentage for young whites by 3 percentage points. This fascinating trend raises expectations that the political strength of blacks in local and state elections will continue to grow. Blacks are projected to constitute a majority of the central city populations of 32 major U.S. cities in 1990, and of 53 cities by 2000. More than two-thirds of these will be in the South.[18]

A larger question will be whether blacks falter in their almost unwavering support of the Democratic party in the future. There is evidence that some younger blacks are turning to the Republicans. The 1987 Gallup survey found that about 18 percent of black adults under age 30 were aligned with the GOP, compared to only 7 percent of the blacks over age 30.[19]

The Gender Question. The term "Gender Gap", born during the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, refers to the marked difference between

Figure 6

Percentage of men and women voting for Ronald Reagan, 1984 election



Source: ref. 6

the sexes in their support of Reagan and the Republican party. This gap was particularly pronounced among younger women, as shown in Figure 6. Also, working women and single women are more inclined to support Democrats over Republicans than non-working and married women.

The trend toward greater labor force participation by women and an increase in the proportion of unmarried women in the U.S. pose a special problem for Republican candidates. Opinion surveys have shown that a majority of working women view the social conservatism of many Republican candidates as a threat to their status. Younger women in particular feel that Democrats are more sensitive to the issues which concern them.

Political scientists disagree about which issues are responsible for the gender gap. Some analysts believe that policies concerning war and peace divide the sexes more sharply than specific "women's issues" like child care or the Equal Rights Amendment. Whatever the reason, the apparent political preferences among a large group of women, along with their increased voter turnout, have made gender a more important variable on the political scene.[5]

The Hispanic Population. The number of Hispanics in the U.S. increased by 30 percent between 1980 and 1987. Although only about 8 percent of the total U.S. population, they could have considerable political clout because their numbers are growing so fast, through immigration and higher birth rates, and because they are concentrated geographically—over 60 percent live in the states of California, Texas, and New York. Hispanics account for one-third of the voting-age population in New Mexico, and about one-sixth in Texas and California. Because they are relatively young—the average age is only 26 compared to 32 for all Americans—their share of the electorate will increase in the future.

More Spanish-surnamed candidates are entering and winning political contests. San Antonio, Texas became the first major American city to elect a Hispanic mayor when Henry Cisneros won that office in 1981. In 1986, Florida elected its first Hispanic governor; New Mexico has had several Hispanic U.S. congressional representatives and governors.

While Hispanics don't all share the same political beliefs, about two-thirds will vote Democratic in a given election. Democratic support is especially strong among Mexican-Americans, the largest and fastest growing Hispanic group. In Texas, Hispanics are projected to form 40 percent of the population by 2035 and could shift the political balance back toward the Democrats. An estimated 65 percent of Texans with Spanish surnames, primarily Mexican-Americans, consider themselves Democrats.

Cuban-Americans, largely concentrated in South Florida, differ markedly from other Hispanic groups both demographically and politically. They tend to be older, more affluent, to have fewer children, to be staunchly anti-communist, and more conservative politically. They usually support Republican candidates, like Florida Governor Robert Martinez.

Changing Congressional Districts

Every 10 years, the results of the U.S. population census are used to reconfigure congressional districts in each state in accordance with the one-person, one-vote principle. Since the characteristics of the population within a district determines the kind of candidate likely to be elected, the political parties have a keen interest in how the district lines are redrawn. The redistricting process probably constitutes the single largest use of demographic data by the political community because the parties, civil rights groups, and others often submit their own redistricting plans to the state.

The law requires the Federal government to provide states and localities with the data needed for

redistricting one year after the decennial census, in this case April 1, 1991. In 1991, these data will include much more information—for example, voting-age population—and greater geographic detail, offering for the first time, data at the block level for the entire country.

These data will also be more widely available in 1991 than they were in 1981 because of new technologies which allow microcomputers to store massive amounts of data. Also, the Census Bureau's new computerized geographic support system, TIGER (Topographical Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing system), will greatly enhance computerized mapping of census data, a fundamental component of the redistricting process.

In addition to enhanced data and technology, the legal landscape is changing. Several court cases settled in the 1980s will impinge on decisions regarding redistricting based on the 1990 Census data.

In the 1983 case of *Karcher* v. *Daggett*, the Supreme Court ruled that New Jersey must accept the redistricting plan which divided its population most equally into congressional districts, even though there was only a tiny statistical difference between the plans submitted. With the availability of more geographically detailed data in 1990, the *Karcher* v. *Daggett* precedent may require states to design districts that are more nearly equal in population size than was the case in the past.

In *Thornberg* v. *Gingles*, decided by the Supreme Court in 1986, several aspects of the Voting Rights Act extension of 1982 were clarified, and, in effect, made it easier for minorities to prove that redistricting plans were unlawful and to justify a change from at-large elections to single-member districts. Because a change to single-member districts often helps minorities win elections, this decision is likely to have important ramifications in the rural South after 1990 when more detailed data and better mapping technologies are available.

The case of *Davis* v. *Bandemer*, decided by the Supreme Court in 1986, could have far-reaching effects, according to some experts. This decision held that political gerrymandering may be illegal in some cases under the Equal Protection Clause. Since most redistricting plans involve some degree of political gerrymandering, this decision could encourage a new wave of litigation during the 1990s' reapportionment process.

American polities of the future will be affected by current demographic trends.

Conclusion

The demography of Americans has a direct bearing on the U.S. electoral process because basic population characteristics affect whether, and to some extent, how people vote. Changing demographic trends will enhance the political power of some groups, but because election outcomes are affected by many volatile factors, no one can really predict how that power will be manifested.

The advent of computer technology and availability of demographic data for small geographic areas has enabled political consultants to refine their techniques for understanding who the electorate is and how they are likely to vote. Most importantly, they are able to maximize the use of scarce campaign funds for targeting specific geographic areas, even specific individuals, with customized messages to woo their financial support and encourage them to vote for a specific candidate or issue.

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POPULATION TRENDS AND PUBLIC POLICY

The Rise of Poverty In Rural America

by William P. O'Hare

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William O'Hare is Director of Policy Studies at the Population Reference Bureau, Inc.

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The Rise of Poverty in Rural America

Summary

As we approach the end of the 1980s, America's rural population is experiencing growing levels of economic distress. By 1986, for example, one out of every four children in rural America was living in poverty, unemployment in rural areas was 26 percent higher than in urban areas, and the escalating population movement out of small towns and the surrounding hinterlands which make up rural America was being led by the better educated.

Recent socioeconomic trends have resulted in declining population growth rates and widespread movement out of rural areas. Outmigration has increased steadily since 1980 and between 1986 and 1987, almost a million more people moved out of rural areas than moved in.

While most of the recent media attention has focused on the urban poor, the poverty rate for the 54 million Americans who live in rural areas has climbed to 18 percent—50 percent higher than in urban areas. By 1986, one out of every five young rural families was living below the poverty line.

Even more worrisome, a large and growing number of young rural adults are poor despite the fact that they are in the work force. In 1986, 12 percent of young workers in rural areas were unable to earn enough to move above the poverty line. Almost three-quarters of rural children in poverty lived in families in which at least one adult was working. Over a quarter of the "working poor" in rural America are employed in service industries which, ironically, have the best growth prospects.

Dramatic demographic and socioeconomic shifts that have occurred in rural areas since 1980 underlie the new rural poverty. Population loss and rising unemployment have followed closely on the heels of the deterioration of the rural economy, pushing many young couples and their children into poverty. Along with a decline in the farm sector, many other rural-based industries—timber, oil, gas, mining—have been adversely affected by national and global economic changes.

This economic upheaval has resulted in a widening of the gap between rural and urban incomes during the 1980s, reversing a trend toward a convergence during the 1970s. Between 1979 and 1986, real median family incomes in rural areas fell by 10 percent. By 1986, the median income of rural families was 26 percent less than that of their urban counterparts.

While the education level of young rural workers is lower than that of young urban workers, this is not the major reason for the higher poverty levels experienced by rural workers. Nor does it explain why poverty has been rapidly increasing in rural areas in the 1980s because educational attainment has also increased.

Most of the rural poor do not receive cash assistance, do not live in public housing, do not receive food stamps, and are not covered by Medicaid. The School Lunch Program is the only major welfare program that reaches the majority of poor families with children. Rural residents are more likely to be ineligible for welfare because they are married couples with children rather than single parents. The rural poor are also more likely than the urban poor to be working.

While there are a few legislative measures now being considered that would provide some potential relief to the rural poor, these initiatives will have little impact on the overall economic well-being of rural residents. Many observers feel that the national and international scope of the trends which have buffeted rural areas requires the federal government to take a larger role in developing economic policies that will halt the decline in America's rural areas.

The Rise of Poverty in Rural America

by William P. O'Hare

Ten years ago the future of rural America looked bright. The rural population was growing faster than the urban population and the economic foundations of most rural areas appeared solid. In the late 1980s, rural America appears to be in trouble. In the words of two prominent researchers, "If rural revitalization was the theme of the 1970s, economic stress is the overriding rural issue of the 1980s."[1]

Dramatic demographic and socioeconomic shifts have occurred in rural areas over the last decade, increasing poverty among America's rural population. But the growing level of distress among this group of needy Americans has received little public attention. The extent of the economic struggle, documented here in a new analysis of 1987 data, may startle even those familiar with the problem.

While decline in rural America has hurt nearly everyone living there, no group has suffered more than young families. The plight of these families is especially noteworthy because economic difficulties have pushed growing numbers of rural children into poverty. As of 1986, *a quarter of all children in rural America were living in poverty*.

The hardships experienced by rural families during the 1980s have been overshadowed by the attention given to the needy in central cities. Yet, the poverty rate in rural America in 1986 was the same as that found in central cities and 50 percent higher than the rate for the entire urban population. The disparity between rural and urban poverty has widened during the 1980s, reversing a 20-year trend.

Declining Population Growth

Perhaps the foremost indicator of change in the social fabric of rural America is a decline in the rate of population growth. Between 1970 and 1980, the yearly rate of population growth in the rural portion of the country was 1.4 percent, significantly higher than that of urban areas (1.0 percent). During the first half of the 1980s, though, the rural population grew at a yearly rate of only 0.7 percent, compared to 1.2 percent in urban areas.

Changing migration patterns are primarily responsible for the slower rate of rural population growth in the 1980s. During the 1970s, rural areas experienced a net inmigration of about 350,000 people each year. During the 1980s, however, the number of people leaving rural areas has grown steadily. There was a net outmigration of nearly 1 million people from rural areas between 1986 and 1987, up from 630,000 the year before (see Figure 1, page 4).[2] While there are inconsistencies between statistics collected before and after 1984 (see Box 1), the general trend of increased outmigration during the 1980s is unmistakable.

Recent net outmigration from rural areas has been pervasive. There has been a net movement from rural to urban areas for every age group, for every major racial group, for both males and females, for married couples, single parents, and those living alone, for homeowners and renters, among those at every educational level and in every region of the country.

Furthermore, those leaving in the largest numbers are young adults and the better educated—people most needed to revitalize rural economies. Almost one-third of the net loss in rural areas between 1986 and 1987 was in the 18 to 24-year-old group. More than half of the adults who moved out of rural areas had at least one year of college, and almost 27 percent had four years of college.

Demographic changes such as these are often symptoms of fundamental structural change. The structural changes behind the heavy outmigration from rural areas are reflected in several economic indicators discussed below.

Rising Unemployment

The economic recession of the early 1980s and the subsequent recovery radically altered rural unemployment rates and patterns. In the two decades prior to 1980, urban unemployment rates exceeded rural rates by about 1 percentage point.

Box 1: What is a Rural Area?

The term rural, as used here, refers to U.S. counties defined as nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and urban refers to counties defined as metropolitan (metro).

Technically, the terms rural and nonmetro as used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census are not synonymous. Metropolitan areas are comprised of counties which surround large cities (typically a city of 50,000 or more) including outlying counties that are socially and economically tied to the core county. Any county that is not part of a metro area is classified as nonmetro. Roughly two-thirds of the counties in the country are nonmetro, but they contain only 23 percent of the nation's people.

The term urban, as used by the Census Bureau, includes two kinds of areas: (1) large cities and densely settled, adjacent suburbs; and (2) all places, or communities, of 2,500 or more people regardless of where they are located. Any area that is not urban is deemed rural.

In many of the nonmetro counties there are cities and small towns of 2,500 or more people that are classified as urban by the Census Bureau and many metro counties include areas that fall into the Census Bureau's rural category.

Data for urban and rural areas are usually available only from the decennial census. However, data for metro and nonmetro areas are available yearly from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

In 1983, the Office of Management and Budget updated the definition of metropolitan areas by identifying new metro areas and expanding the boundaries of existing metro areas based on (1) changes in the criteria used to determine metro status and (2) the results of the 1980 Census.

The Current Population Survey

Most of the data cited in this report are based on the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For the March CPS, the Census Bureau interviews a representative sample of people in 60,000 households to gather information on demographic, social, and economic characteristics. Data from this annual survey—in printed form or on computer tape—are the best source of data on current trends and population characteristics.

The CPS sampling frame was redesigned in 1984, making it more difficult to interpret changes in the nonmetro population during the 1980s. This modification abruptly converted the residential status of nearly 20 million people from nonmetro to metro (or rural to urban using our terminology). Consequently, statistics on the rural population from before and after 1984 are not strictly comparable.

However, the CPS data remain the best available data to study most socioeconomic trends and a preliminary analysis by the author shows that the redefinition of rural and urban areas in the CPS had a minimal impact on the overall trends within the rural population.

But during the recession, rural unemployment rates rose more rapidly than urban rates, peaked at a higher level, and have remained above urban rates throughout the 1980s. In 1986, the unemployment rate for the labor force in rural areas was 26 percent higher than that for urban areas.[3]

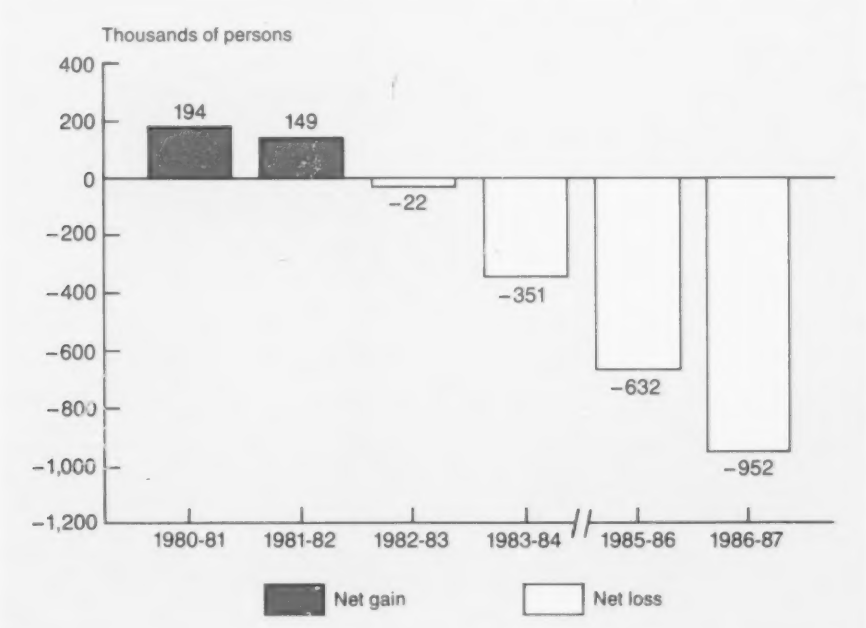
The unemployment rate, however, does not tell the whole story. The jobless in rural areas are more likely to be discouraged workers who are not looking for work; therefore, they are not included in unemployment data. Also, rural workers are more likely to be underemployed, holding part-time jobs while waiting for full-time positions. When adjustments are made for these two factors, unemployment is estimated to be 31 percent higher in rural areas than in urban areas.[4]

Many of the industries which have been the backbone of the rural economy (agriculture, timber, oil, gas, mining, and routine manufacturing) deteriorated during the 1980s. This has had a devastating impact on workers in many rural communities. The number of jobs in rural counties grew by only 3 percent between 1979 and 1985, while the number of jobs in urban counties grew by 10 percent during the same period.[5]

The higher unemployment rate in rural areas reflects the limited ability of local economies to respond to unforeseen economic shifts because of their dependence on a narrow economic base, often a single industry. The plight of counties dependent upon manufacturing or agriculture, for example, are similar. A concentration of low-skilled occupations within a single industry, coupled with geographic isolation, makes rural areas more susceptible to economic downswings.

Because of the media attention given to the farm crisis, many Americans mistakenly believe that the farmers' economic problems are the driv-

Figure 1
*Net migration for rural areas in the 1980s **



*Data for 1984-85 not available

Source: ref. 1

Geographic isolation and single-industry dependency often limit job options in rural areas.

ing force behind the rise in rural poverty in the 1980s. However, America's rural economy is no longer based primarily on agricultural but on nonagricultural industries. A century ago, almost half of the U.S. population lived on farms. As recently as 1950 about 15 percent lived on farms. In 1987, the 5.1 million people who resided on farms represented only 2.1 percent of the total U.S. population and less than *10 percent* of the entire rural population.[6]

As the farm sector faded, rural residents sought jobs in other industries. In 1984, resource-based industries (including forestry, fisheries, and mining, as well as agriculture) employed about 15 percent of rural workers, while 18 percent worked in manufacturing, 5 percent in construction, and 63 percent in service and trade industries. The greatest growth in rural—as in urban—jobs in the 1980s has been in the service, trade, and government industries.[7]

During the 1960s and 1970s, many rural counties competed successfully with urban areas in attracting new manufacturing industries. But the growth of rural manufacturing jobs has been concentrated in routine manufacturing industries, such as food, textiles and apparel, or furniture production, while more complex manufacturing industries (such as those producing chemical or electrical goods) remain concentrated in urban areas. Manufacturing industries employ a similar share of the urban and rural labor forces: 17 percent in urban areas compared to 18 percent in rural areas. However, about half of the manufacturing workers in urban areas are in complex manufacturing industries compared to less than a third of the rural workers. Routine manufacturing industries, employing 72 percent of the rural manufacturing workers and 13 percent of the total rural labor force, require less skilled labor for tasks such as garment inspection, repetitive assembly work, or simple machine operation. These industries have been, and will continue to be, hurt by competition from foreign labor.

Falling Incomes

Changes in the economic underpinnings of rural America have hurt the incomes of rural workers. In 1986, the median family income for urban families was $31,639 compared to only $23,229 for rural families.[8]

Historically, incomes were lower in rural areas—even after cost-of-living adjustments[9]—but the gap between urban and rural incomes has grown during the 1980s primarily because rural incomes have declined in real terms.

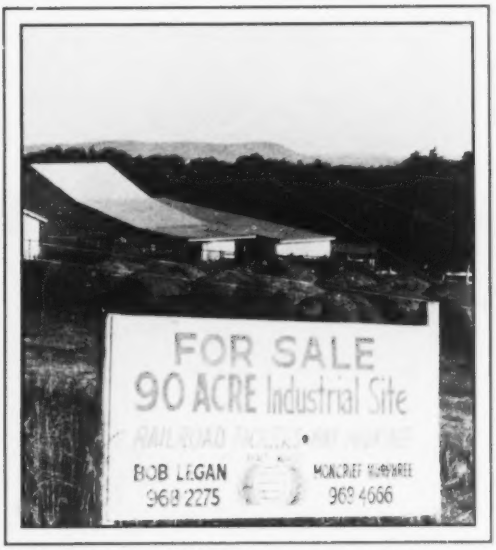
During the 1970s the incomes of rural residents were catching up with those of urban residents. By 1979, the median family income in rural areas was 79 percent of that in urban areas, up from 75 percent in 1969. By 1986, however, rural median family income had declined to 73 percent of that in urban areas. After accounting for inflation, real median family income fell by 10 percent in rural areas between 1979 and 1986, compared to a decline of less than 1 percent in urban areas.

Apart from lower salaries, rural jobs often provide fewer fringe benefits. In 1986, for example, half of all urban workers (51 percent) had an employer-sponsored pension plan compared to only 44 percent of rural workers. The higher rate of employer-sponsored pension plans among urban workers is likely to perpetuate the economic gap between rural and urban areas because it will provide urban retirees with extra income.

Increasing Poverty

The loss of population, rising unemployment, and deteriorating economic conditions are closely linked to an increase in poverty among rural Americans. Furthermore, the gap between urban and rural poverty rates has begun to widen, reversing the trend of the past several decades (see Figure 2, page 7).

High poverty rates in rural areas are not new.



Manufacturing industries have expanded in rural areas and employ far more workers than farming.

Using the government poverty standard (see Box 2), the 1959 poverty rate in rural areas was 33 percent, more than twice the urban rate of 15 percent. But the gap between urban and rural poverty rates began to close, slowly during the 1960s and more rapidly during the early 1970s. By 1979, the rates had nearly converged: The poverty rate was 14 percent in rural areas and 11 percent in urban areas.

Since 1980, however, the gap between urban and rural poverty rates has grown, in part because many rural sections of the country have recovered more slowly from the recession of the early 1980s than have urban areas; many areas have not recovered at all. The result is a high rate of poverty among rural families and an uncertain future for them and their children.

U.S. Census Bureau figures show that the poverty rate in rural areas was only 28 percent higher than the rate in urban areas in 1979, but it was nearly 50 percent higher than the urban rate in 1986. In that year the poverty rate for the rural population was 18 percent compared to 12 percent in urban America.

Interpretation of the change in rural poverty levels between 1979 and 1986 has been complicated by changes in the rural definition (see Box 1, page 3), but the major trends are clear.

Rural poverty appears to have become more entrenched relative to urban poverty during the 1980s. Rural rates have remained higher and rural residents have been trapped below the poverty line for a longer time.[10] The rural poverty rate rose more rapidly than the urban rate between 1979 and 1983, and did not fall as much as the urban rate between 1985 and 1986. Between 1978 and 1982, 5 percent of urban residents remained poor during the entire period, compared to 8 percent of rural residents.[11]

Some analysts argue that the comparison of rural and urban poverty rates is misleading because the relatively well-off suburbs in urban areas mask the high poverty rates in central cities. This

Box 2: The Poverty Index

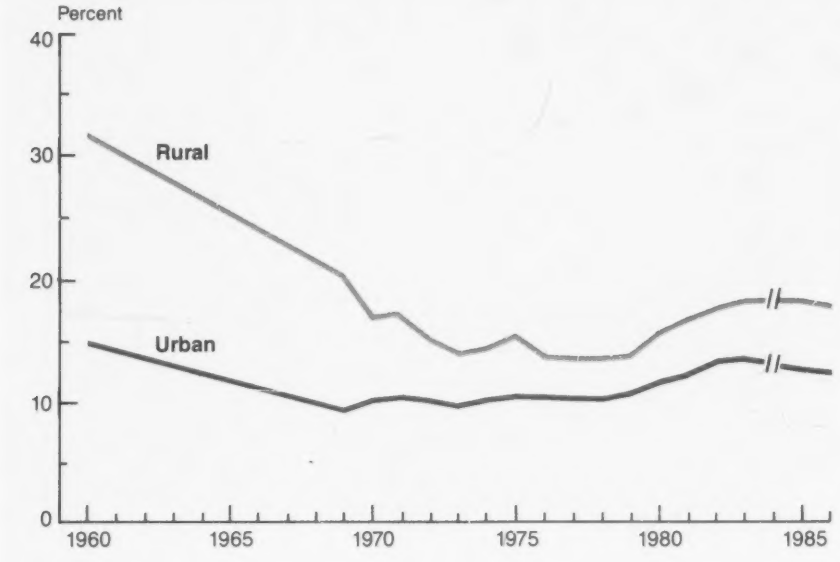
Families and people living alone or with other unrelated individuals are classified as being above or below the poverty level on the basis of the poverty index constructed by the Social Security Administration in 1964. The poverty index, which only counts money income, is based on the 1961 Economy Food Plan of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and reflects the consumption needs of families, depending on their size and composition.

A Department of Agriculture's Survey of Food Consumption in 1955 found that families of three or more persons spent an average of about one-third of their income on food. The poverty level for these families was therefore set at three times the cost of the Economy Food Plan. For smaller families and persons living alone, the cost of the Economy Food Plan was multiplied by factors that were slightly higher to take account of the relatively larger fixed expenses of smaller households.

The poverty income thresholds are updated each year to reflect changes in the Consumer Price Index or inflation. In 1986 the threshold was $11,203 for an average family of four, and the range was from $5,572 for a single person to $22,497 for a family of nine or more persons.

Figure 2

*Percentage of population in poverty by urban/rural residence: 1959 to 1986 **



*Data for 1984 not available

Source: ref. 2

might have been true in the past, but between 1979 and 1986 the poverty rate in rural areas caught up with the rate for central cities. In 1979, the poverty rate in central cities was 15 percent higher than that in rural areas; by 1986, the rural poverty rate of 18 percent was virtually equal to that in the central cities.

Poverty Among Young Families

The overall poverty rate for rural areas increased by 29 percent between 1979 and 1986, but the recent economic problems in rural areas have hit young adults and their children particularly hard (see Figure 3, page 8). Between 1979 and 1986, the poverty rate grew by 55 percent among young adults, aged 18 to 44. Over the same period the poverty rate increased by 39 percent among children under age 18 and only 22 percent for older working-age adults between the ages of 45 and 64. In sharp contrast to the trends in the younger population, the poverty rate for the those over age 64 in rural areas actually *decreased* by 17 percent during the period.

In 1986, 25 percent of the rural children under 18 lived in poor households, compared to only about 15 percent of rural residents in the prime working ages, 18 to 64, and 18 percent of those age 65 or older.

Most older rural residents receive social security retirement payments—a stable source of income, adjusted annually to reflect increases in the cost of living. Younger rural families, on the other hand, must rely on parental earnings or public assistance. Earned income has been an unstable source of economic support for many rural families during the 1980s, and public assistance has not provided enough cash to lift people out of poverty. Furthermore, neither of these income sources kept pace with inflation during the 1980s.

Poverty among young adults and children increased in all parts of the country during the 1980s, but between 1979 and 1986 the poverty rate for young adults and children increased twice as fast in rural areas as it did in urban areas. In 1979, the poverty rate for young adults in rural areas was only 16 percent above that in urban areas. By 1986, however, the poverty rate for young adults in rural areas was 50 percent above the poverty rate for this age group in urban areas.

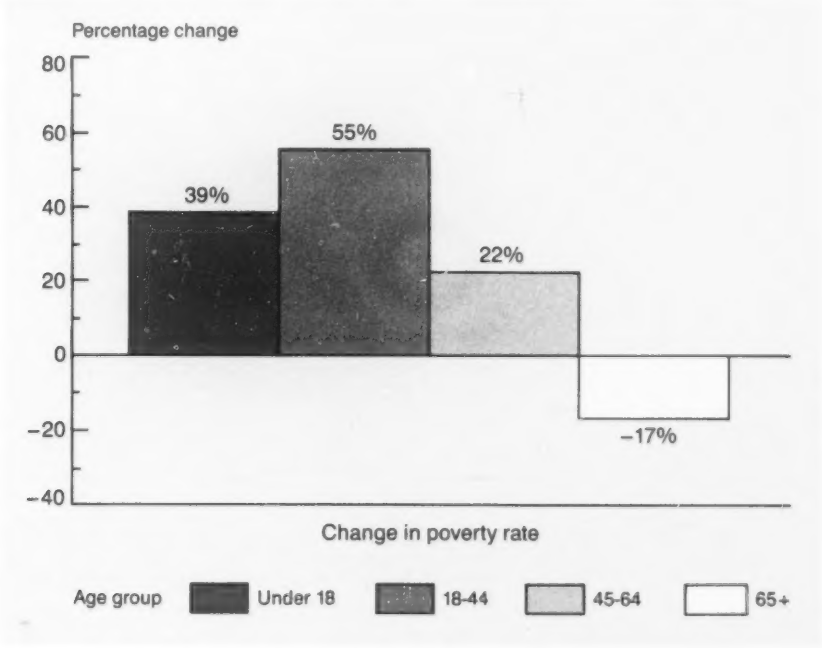
By 1987, more than *one out of every five young rural families was living below the poverty level.* Among those just entering the rural job market the situation was even worse. Almost one-third (32 percent) of rural families headed by someone between the ages of 18 and 29 were poor in 1986, up from 19 percent in 1979. It is not hard to understand why many young people leave rural areas when they are faced with such prospects.

It is widely recognized that poverty among children has grown dramatically in the past decade, but it is not widely noted that this increase has hit rural children disproportionately and that it is occurring most often among families where the parents work or are seeking work.

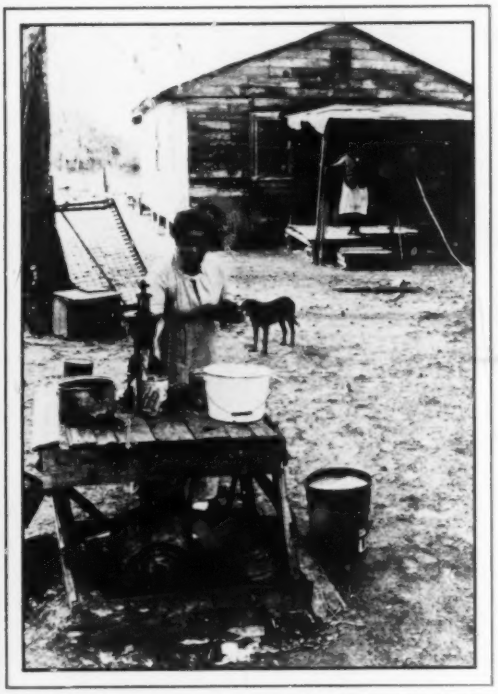
In 1979, the poverty rate among children in rural areas was 11 percent above that in urban areas; by 1986 it was almost one-third higher than that for children in urban areas.

Black children in the rural South, especially those from single-parent families, have experienced spectacularly high poverty rates. In 1986, *57 percent* of the nearly 1.8 million black children in the rural South were living in poverty. Of the black children in the rural South who lived in single-parent families, *78 percent* were poor. The high level of poverty among blacks in the rural South is associated with elevated levels of infant mortality, illiteracy, unemployment, and poor housing conditions. The high level of poverty among black children in the rural South reflects the fact that many young black adults in the region cannot

Figure 3
Changes in rural poverty rates between 1979 and 1986



Source: ref. 3



In 1986, 68 percent of young black families in the rural South were poor.

find jobs which pay enough to lift themselves and their families above the poverty line.

For young blacks just entering the work force, the situation was dire in 1979 and it is not improving. In 1986, 68 percent of black families in the rural South headed by someone aged 18 to 29 were poor. In 1979, the figure was 46 percent.

The story is similar for Hispanics living in rural areas. Nearly half of all rural Hispanic children were poor in 1986, and *46 percent* of Hispanic families headed by someone aged 18 to 29 were poor in 1986, a significant rise over the 1979 rate of 30 percent.

Education and Poverty

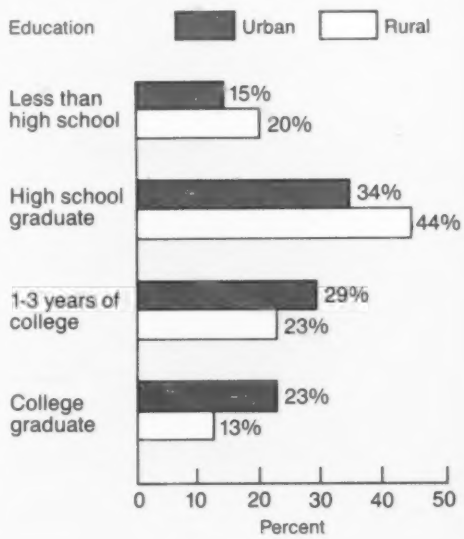
Why have the poverty levels among young adults and children in rural areas escalated so rapidly during the 1980s? The lower levels of education and higher unemployment in rural areas are closely linked to poverty status, but rural/urban differences in education and work experience do not adequately explain why the poverty level for young adults is higher in rural than in urban areas or why it has climbed so quickly in recent years.

Even though the educational attainment of rural residents has increased in recent years, the average educational levels of young rural adults are still far below those of their urban counterparts. In 1987, 20 percent of young rural adults never finished high school, while less than 15 percent of young adults living in urban areas failed to finish (see Figure 4). The gap is wider at higher educational levels: 23 percent of the young adults in urban areas completed four years of college, compared to only 13 percent in rural areas.

Young adults living in rural areas tend to have less formal education than those in urban areas not only because rural residents are less likely to complete high school, or to go on to college if they do graduate from high school, but also because the better educated adults have been moving out of rural areas.

While poverty and low educational levels usually go hand-in-hand, educational differences do not

Figure 4
Educational attainment of adults 18 to 44 by urban/rural status: 1987



Source: ref. 4

fully explain the disparity between urban and rural poverty rates. In Figure 5, education-specific poverty rates are compared for young adult workers in rural areas in 1979 and 1986 and for young adult workers in urban areas in 1986. In both urban and rural areas, as the educational level increases the poverty rate decreases, but at every educational level poverty rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas. For young workers who dropped out of high school, the poverty rate in rural areas in 1986 was 24 percent, compared to 20 percent in urban areas; for high school graduates the poverty rate in rural areas was 11 percent, compared to 7 percent in urban areas; and for those with 1 to 3 years of college the poverty rate was 9 percent in rural areas, compared to 5 percent in urban areas. A young rural worker who completed 1 to 3 years of college is more likely to be poor than a young urban worker with just a high school education.

Furthermore, the educational differences do not explain the dramatic increase in poverty among young rural adults between 1979 and 1986. The overall level of educational attainment improved for rural workers 18 to 44 years of age, but for every level of education the poverty rate for young adults in rural areas was higher in 1986 than in 1979. The poverty rate for young adult workers in rural areas with less than a high school education went from 17 to 24 percent between 1979 and 1986. Similar jumps occurred in the other educational classifications.

The higher poverty rates for young rural workers, after educational levels have been taken into account, reflect the lower wages in rural areas. They also portray the difficulty encountered by many young adults trying to break into the rural labor market.

To some extent, the poverty rate among young families in rural America has grown because many of those with the best education and skills have moved to urban areas, leaving behind those least able to adjust to a changing economy. Also, as the rural occupational structure has shifted, younger workers have been more likely to move into lower paying occupations and are the first to lose their jobs under "last hired-first fired" rules. Among rural workers with the same level of education, younger workers are more likely to be poor than older workers.

Rural school systems are typically poorer than those in urban areas, but it is unlikely that inferior education is mainly responsible for the lower incomes of rural workers. Rural/urban differences in the quality of educational systems do not explain why poverty levels have increased for young rural workers at every educational level, or why young workers in rural areas have higher poverty rates than older workers with the same amount of education.

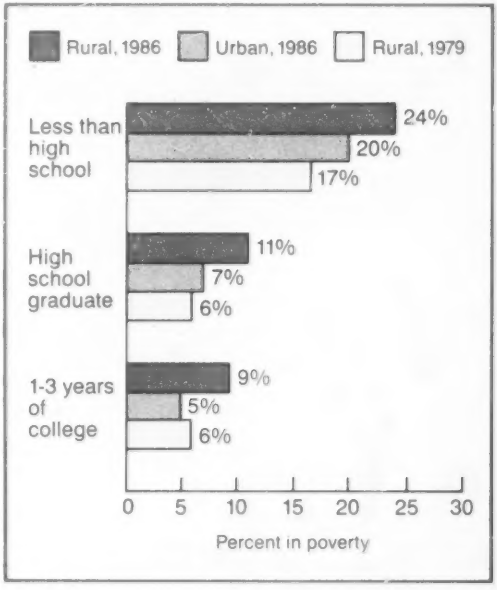
The Working Poor

Children and the elderly, who typically are not expected to work, made up half (51 percent) of the poor in both urban and rural populations in 1986. Furthermore, ill and disabled adults comprised 11 percent of the working-age poor adults in urban areas and 12 percent in rural areas. Thus, about two-thirds of the poor in both rural and urban areas consists of people who cannot be expected to support themselves.

However, these numbers also mean that one-third of the poor in both rural and urban areas is comprised of able-bodied adults of working age. There is growing recognition that a significant portion of these adults are not poor because they lack the motivation to work but because they cannot

Figure 5

Poverty rates by education for three groups of young adults, ages 18 to 44



Source: ref. 5

The rural poor are more likely than the urban poor to have jobs at least part of the year, but fail to earn enough to rise above the poverty level.

find work or, if they have jobs, cannot earn enough money to climb above the poverty threshold.[12]

In 1986, 62 percent of poor rural adults and 54 percent of poor urban adults aged 18 to 44 held a job at least part of the year, but their incomes remained below the poverty line. These "working poor," numbering about 10 million nationally, have received increasing attention from policymakers, and they account for a greater share of the rural than the urban poor.

While families sometimes ward off poverty by sending more people into the workplace, this strategy is less effective in rural areas. The poverty rate for young rural families with one wage-earner was 31 percent in 1986, compared to 20 percent in urban areas, while the poverty rate for rural families with two or more wage-earners was more than double that of similar urban families. Almost 8 percent of the young rural families with two or more wage-earners were poor in 1986.

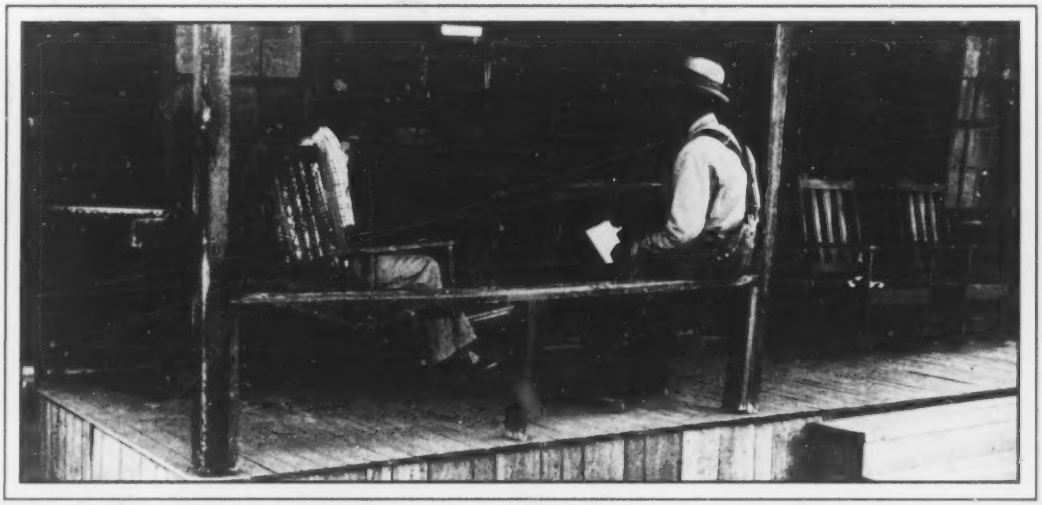
The workplace difficulties faced by young adults have important ramifications for children. *In 1986, 72 percent of the children of young rural families in poverty lived in families where at least one adult was working*, compared to only 59 percent of the poor children in urban areas. One has to wonder what message these children get when they see their parents remain in poverty despite the fact that they are working.

Changing Demographics

Some of the problems faced by young workers in rural areas stem from changing demographics. The young adult population in the U.S. is largely made up of the 75 million members of the baby-boom cohort born between 1946 and 1964. Beginning in the 1970s, the huge number of baby-boomers reaching working age each year, coupled with a steep rise in the labor force participation of women, crowded the job market in both rural and urban areas of the country. However, as the local economies in many rural areas began to decline in the 1980s, rural workers under age 45 faced even more intense competition for a dwindling number of jobs.

Overall, the number of young rural adults in poverty who worked or looked for work increased from 1.5 million in 1979 to 2.0 million in 1986, even though the total rural population in this age group fell by 15 percent during this period.

Furthermore, the number of young adults in poverty in rural areas who worked part-time shot up by 70 percent between 1979 and 1986; the share reporting that they had not worked the previous year because they could not find a job grew from 10 to 23 percent during the same period. About one-quarter of poor young adults in the rural labor force held two or more jobs in 1986.



A majority of the rural poor do not receive welfare benefits.

Growth of Low-Paying Jobs

Economic change in rural areas created new jobs in low-paying occupations. Large numbers of young working poor are already employed in the economic sectors which have experienced the greatest growth of new jobs. The high rate of poverty among workers in the service industry, for example, is particularly vexing, because this is one part of the rural economy that is likely to grow in the years ahead.

Three sectors of the economy accounted for two-thirds of all the rural working poor between the ages of 18 and 44. More than a quarter (28 percent) of young working-poor adults were in service industries, 25 percent were in trade, and 13 percent were in farming. The major occupations and industries of the rural working poor changed very little between 1979 and 1986.

Welfare Assistance

While poverty and welfare are synonymous in the minds of many people, the majority of people in poverty, whether urban or rural, do not receive benefits from most major welfare programs. Moreover, the poor in rural areas are less likely to receive public assistance than the urban poor.

Except for children living in families headed by someone between the ages of 18 and 44 who participated in the School Lunch Program, a majority of the poor did not receive benefits from welfare programs in 1986 (see Figure 6). Poor young families in rural areas are less likely than their urban counterparts to receive cash public assistance, free school lunches, or Medicaid, but are slightly more likely to receive food stamps. About 13 percent of impoverished young families in both urban and rural areas who reside in rental housing lived in public housing.

Since the rural poor are generally less likely than the poor living in cities to receive public assistance benefits, the gap in well-being between the urban and rural poor is even wider than the poverty figures alone would indicate.

Perhaps the most noteworthy difference between urban and rural groups is the 5-percentage-point gap in the rate at which the two groups are covered by Medicaid. In 1986, only one-third of the poor adults in rural areas were covered by Medicaid. In 1986, 41 percent of poor young adults in rural areas had no health insurance, and *over one-third of the children in rural areas who reside in poor families lacked any kind of health care coverage*. The figures for urban residents are about the same.

Since a larger share of the rural poor work, legislation being discussed in the U.S. Congress that would require all employers to provide health insurance for employees would benefit the rural poor more than the poor in urban areas.

Young families in rural areas are less likely than urban families to depend on cash welfare payments as their only source of income. In 1986, half of the 600,000 poor adults aged 18 to 44 in rural areas who received cash public assistance also

earned wages or had other sources of income, compared to only 38 percent of poor young adults in urban areas.

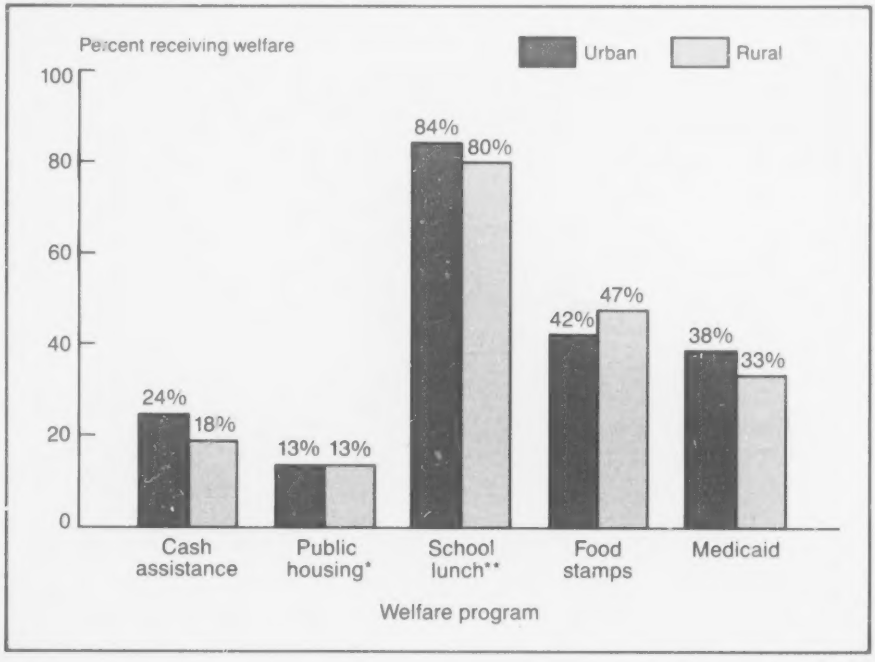
There are several possible reasons why rural residents do not receive the share of welfare benefits one would expect, based on poverty rates. The rural poor are more likely to be living in married-couple families, making them ineligible for the major welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), in nearly half the states. The rural poor are also more likely than the urban poor to be working, which makes them ineligible for some welfare programs. Those living on farms, and therefore likely to have significant assets, may be made ineligible by the "assets test" used to determine eligibility for many welfare programs. Some observers would also argue that pride and a "sense of independence" are stronger among rural residents, and that this curtails their participation in welfare programs.

Policy Implications

To a great extent, the public image of the poor in the 1980s is based on media attention to the growing urban underclass.[13] This has left an impression that poverty in the 1980s is largely, if not solely, an urban problem. However, the rural poverty rate is 50 percent higher than the urban poverty rate, and nearly one out of every five rural residents is poor. The rural poverty rate is just as high as that found in our large central cities, but the rural poor are not as likely as the poor living in urban areas to be reached by welfare.

Figure 6

Percentage of young adults in poverty who received welfare in 1986 by rural/urban status



*for renters only
**for households with children aged 5 to 17

Source: ref. 6

Many observers feel that anti-poverty legislation is often resisted by political representatives from rural areas who believe that such measures favor city residents.[14] In fact, poverty is disproportionately concentrated in rural areas and most policies which reduce poverty are likely to have a more beneficial effect on rural residents than on urban ones.

Furthermore, a larger share of the rural poor are in categories that most Americans would call the deserving poor. Married-couple families and workers form a bigger share of the poverty population in rural areas than in urban areas.

Need for Tax Relief

Rural poverty is exacerbated by the fact that the rural poor are more likely than their urban counterparts to rely on earnings and to own a home; thus, they are more likely to pay taxes. In 1987, half of the rural poor were homeowners, compared to only 30 percent of the poor in urban areas. While homeownership may provide benefits in terms of social status and potential wealth in terms of equity, it also carries costs which are particularly burdensome to the poor. In the rural portion of the country, 43 percent of the poor pay property tax, compared to only 28 percent in urban areas. In fact, poor households in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to pay federal income tax, state income tax, and social security tax.[15] Policies which reduce the tax burden of the poor would therefore aid those in rural areas more than those in urban areas.

Two policy changes currently being discussed in the U.S. Congress would have more beneficial effects on the rural poor since a larger share of them are workers. One is a measure to adjust the Earned Income Tax Credit for family size which would allow rural workers to reduce the amount of tax withheld from their earnings. The other is to increase the minimum wage, which has lost over 25 percent of its purchasing power since it was last increased in 1981.

Welfare Reform

Welfare reform has been widely discussed during the past few years, and one major theme of the discussions has been the idea that welfare recipients should work, or engage in work-related activity such as training, in exchange for assistance. Some proposals for welfare reform would terminate assistance for recipients who did not find a job within a specified period of time. Measures along these lines are likely to affect the rural poor

The farm population and the farming industry are only a small part of contemporary rural society.

Rural states often have more restrictive welfare eligibility rules and offer fewer benefits.

differently than those in urban areas because a larger share of the poor in rural areas are already working. Additionally, a recent analysis indicates that the kinds of jobs that most rural welfare recipients are likely to be qualified for are difficult to find.[16]

While much of the recent debate about welfare reform has centered on how to amend federal laws, state governments also make critical decisions about welfare policies. It is the states, for example, that decide who is eligible for AFDC benefits and how much assistance eligible families will receive. Consequently, the distribution of the rural population across states has important implications for their access to welfare. Predominantly rural states are more restrictive in determining who is eligible for public assistance, and they are less generous in the amount of assistance they provide.[17]

Spurring Economic Development

Although it would be hard to find one policy prescription that would be right for all rural areas of the country, the continued loss of population—particularly the outmigration of highly educated people—signifies a need for new policy initiatives which will provide economic opportunities within the rural economy. There is strong evidence that many young adults in rural areas are looking for work but are unable to find jobs that will pull them out of poverty.

Economic development strategies also need to recognize that the farm population and the farm economy are only a small part of contemporary rural society. While the health of America's farms is important for rural America, the rest of the country, and for many other parts of the world, it is crucial to view economic development in rural areas in broader terms than aid to agriculture.

Economic decline and increased poverty in rural America are tied to broader societal changes. Many of the factors that have had a harmful impact on rural areas are national and international in scope. For example, the strength or weakness of the dollar vis-à-vis other currencies has important consequences for the sale of U.S. farm produce overseas. The broad "structural economic changes" which have affected the employment base in many rural areas are products of a changing national and international economic system. The U.S. trade deficit and interest rates are closely tied to federal government actions over which rural residents have little control. But, given the importance of national and international factors, many experts believe that the federal government must play a larger policy role in halting the decline of rural America.

Conclusion

The reversal from above-average population growth and economic progress in rural areas in the 1970s to sluggish economic growth and sustained outmigration in the 1980s has been accompanied by a rise in poverty among rural Americans, especially for young families. Poverty in rural areas appears to be more entrenched than in the urban areas, even though a greater share of the rural poor hold jobs.

Analysts and policymakers have been searching for ways to relieve the economic stress in rural areas, but little has been accomplished. Regardless of one's opinion about the underlying causes, it is clear that the 1980s have been unkind to rural residents, and that concerted efforts are needed if the decline of rural America is to be halted.

Footnotes

1. David Brown and Kenneth Deavers, *Rural Economic Development in the 1980s* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1987), p. 1-2.
2. The 1987 CPS shows a net outmigration of about 950,000 from rural to urban areas between 1986 and 1987, but the same source indicates that the rural population grew by 209,000 between the two dates. Such an increase in population, given the migration figures, would require a natural increase of nearly 1.2 million, about three times the rate in recent years.
3. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings*, Volume 34, Number 1, January 1987, p. 217.
4. Brown and Deavers, *Rural Economic Development*, Table 1, p. 1-17.
5. *Ibid.*, Table 8, p. 1-24.
6. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Money Income and Poverty Status of Families and Persons in the United States: 1986" (Advance Data from the March 1987 Current Population Survey) *Current Population Reports: Consumer Income*, Series P-60, No. 157, July 1987, Table 18.
7. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *1986 Agricultural Chartbook* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Nov. 1986), Chart 123.
8. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, No. 157, Table 1 and Table 14.
9. While metro income is 36 percent higher than that for the nonmetro population, 1984 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that expenditures for urban households are only 26 percent more than for rural households. One recent opinion poll which asked people "how much money a family needs to get along in their community" found that residents of big cities (over 50,000) gave a figure about 21 percent higher than those living in small towns and rural areas.
10. Greg Duncan, *Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, 1984), Table 2.2, p. 49; and *1986 Agricultural Chartbook*, Chart 11.
11. *1986 Agricultural Chartbook*, Chart 11.
12. Sar Levitan and Isaac Shapiro, *Working But Poor: America's Contradiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and Steve Burghardt and Michael Fabricant, *Working Under the Safety Net: Policy and Practice with the New American Poor* (Newberry Park, CA: Sage Human Services Guide 47, Sage Publications, 1987).
13. CBS Reports television program "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America" with Bill Moyers, January 25, 1986; Leon Dash's series "At Risk: The Chronicles of Teenage Pregnancy," *Washington Post*, January 26 to 31, 1986; Nicholas Lemann's series "The Origins of the Underclass," *Atlantic Monthly*, June and July 1986; and William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
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